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SUBJECT: MOHAMMAD SALIM SPOUTS COMMUNIST LINE ON NUCLEAR
AND NANDIGRAM

REF: KOLKATA 345

Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

11. (C) Summary: Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) Member of Parliament Mohammad Salim justified the violence in Nandigram to PolCouns November 20 by claiming that the Communists drove out violent Maoists and restored law and order in the area. Now, he asserted, the CPM will prioritize peace. On the civil nuclear initiative, Salim picked apart the 123 Agreement and Hyde Act, claiming that they did not offer full civil nuclear cooperation and would impact India's foreign policy. He recognized that the Left brought historical baggage in its consideration of U.S.-India relations, and urged the U.S. and Indian governments to slow the process down. PolCouns and Poloff firmly countered Salim's arguments, but he remained close-minded, refusing to acknowledge that stalling the deal will hurt India's global aspirations. End Summary.

Salim Expresses Communist Fear of U.S. Bloc

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12. (C) In a November 20 meeting with PolCouns, Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) Member of Parliament Mohammad Salim contended that, while the Left "does not object" to peaceful nuclear energy and cooperation with the U.S., it feared the implications for India's foreign policy. "Whether we should join the U.S. Bloc, that is the apprehension," he related. Asked by PolCouns which countries comprise the "U.S. Bloc," Salim answered, "Israel and Palau." While the Left believed that India and the U.S. could work together, "we do not want to put ourselves in the U.S. strategic plan in Asia," he explained. He questioned why the U.S. put language regarding Iran in the Hyde Act, and held it as proof that the U.S. intended to strong-arm India. PolCouns responded that the Hyde Act language on Iran was non-binding, and noted that the nuclear initiative did not take away India's right to choose how it interacted internationally.

13. (C) Salim noted that the "integrated media" has "appreciated the gesture you have shown India," and portrayed the nuclear initiative as good. Moreover, he recognized that the urban elite and intellectuals have expressed support for implementing the initiative. However, he pointed out, those supporters comprise only 20 percent of India's population, and the remaining 80 percent have concerns about the closer relationship with the U.S. He asked why the U.S. and Indian governments have rushed implementation. "Why are you in such a hurry?" he asked. Salim expected the Left to deliberate

further over the agreement after the Indian negotiators return from Vienna.

¶4. (C) Salim acknowledged that the Left has significant "anti-U.S. baggage." The "past deception" on Iraq and Pakistan, and the ongoing effort to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear program, have made the Communists suspicious, he noted. PolCouns encouraged Salim to consider the nuclear initiative as the area where the U.S. and India's core national interests converge. Salim recounted that India has counted on its "friendship with third world countries" to survive the "onslaught" from the industrial world. The non-aligned countries "share positions on universal disarmament, nonproliferation, peace and stability," he underlined.

Nuclear Criticism Regurgitated

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¶5. (C) Salim related that the internal debate between the Left and UPA government involved whether the 123 Agreement and Hyde Act fulfilled all of the Prime Minister's commitments that he pledged in his August 17, 2006 speech to Parliament. He stated that the 123 Agreement does provide "full civil nuclear cooperation," because it restricts trade in heavy water production technology, sensitive technology, and reprocessing equipment. Salim also claimed that the 123 Agreement did not contain the promised guarantee of fuel. Finally, he complained that the 123 Agreement lacked the arbitration mechanism that the China and Japan agreements featured. PolCouns and Poloff countered Salim's criticism point-by-point, but Salim repeatedly moved on to the next argument when confronted.

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Nandigram Violence Blamed on Maoists

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¶6. (C) Regarding the spate of CPM-led violence in Nandigram, West Bengal (reftel), Salim pinned the blame on the Maoists. He linked the Maoist presence to their prevalence in adjoining states, and asserted that the Maoists wanted a seafront location for smuggling. "We wanted peace and started to flush out the the Maoists from the riverine area," he explained. He recalled that since January 2007, when law and order in the village broke down, Naxalites have infiltrated the area. He claimed that the Maoists inducted several villagers and neighboring villages had spotted seaplanes in the area. Asked about Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee's involvement, Salim hinted that from 1999 to 2001 she "had discussions" in border areas of neighboring states. While Salim refrained from accusing Banerjee of direct ties to the Maoists, he noted that there "was some overlap in the membership" of her party and the Maoists. "By day Congress, by night Maoist," he asserted.

¶7. (C) Salim saw the Nandigram situation as part of a problem that reached back to the lack of resolution over land distribution when India became independent. In this case, he continued, the government's proposal of establishing a chemical hub divided the village, and triggered rumors, which Salim considered particularly dangerous in such an insular community as Nandigram. An "insider-outsider" mentality developed, resulting in the expulsion of 3000 villagers by the Maoist presence, he explained. Fearful of violence, the police withdrew, he claimed. Isolated from the rest of the country, the Maoists steadily lost ground, until the most recent incident when, after a steady withdrawal of its leadership, the Maoist cadre fled. Salim denied that a "civil war" had occurred, asserting that "no clash took place." He assured that "now our priority is peace will be restored."

Comment: Close-Minded Communists

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18. (C) As a member of the Indo-U.S. Forum of Parliamentarians and moderate Communist, Salim came off as a politician firmly entrenched against any opposition. He dutifully recited the Communist talking points on Nandigram and nuclear without engaging in a real dialogue. While he claimed to support strong U.S.-India relations, he remained oblivious to the benefits that the nuclear initiative might bring. We have had more thoughtful interactions with others in the Left, but Salim's comments provide proof of the intractable nature of their complaints.

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